

VZCZCXRO4866  
PP RUEH DU RUEHJO  
DE RUEHSA #4513/01 3040843  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 310843Z OCT 06  
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6629  
INFO RUEHJO/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 5635  
RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 3559  
RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 8310  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 004513

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/PDPA, AF/S, DRL/MLA, ECA/AEAF

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION CIRCLES ITS WAGONS  
AFTER REPORT BLASTS ITS NEWS CHIEF

REF: A) PRETORIA 2755; B) PRETORIA 4417

11. (SBU) Summary: The embattled South African Broadcast Corporation (SABC) took another hit to its credibility with the unauthorized release of a report confirming the Managing Director of its News and Current Affairs Division banned certain commentators, in some cases for politically motivated reasons (Ref B). By releasing a watered-down summary of the report, frantically seeking to suppress publication of the full report, and expressing "full confidence" in the much-maligned news chief, the SABC Board has stoked concerns that the public broadcaster is failing its mandate to be independent and not a government mouthpiece. The SABC chief executive officer's subsequent attempt to portray the criticism as the whining of whites unhappy with black governance has added a racial undertone to the controversy. End Summary.

-----  
SABC's Annus Horribilis  
-----

12. (U) Public Broadcaster SABC is the dominant media organization in South Africa. With three of the country's four free-to-air television stations and a far-reaching radio network that broadcasts in all 11 national languages, SABC is uniquely positioned to influence politics and national discourse.

13. (U) Earlier this year, SABC came under fire for behavior that recalled the days when the public broadcaster was little more than a mouthpiece for the white apartheid government (Ref A). Raising alarms were a last-minute decision to reject a documentary that voiced criticism of President Mbeki and reports that certain commentators critical of the government had been banned from the public airwaves. Reeling from the resulting criticism, the Board asked a former SABC group chief executive and a widely respected lawyer to investigate the allegations of a commentator "blacklist." The probe was expected to focus on Snuki Zikalala, the Managing Director of SABC's News and Current Affairs Division, who is a former government spokesman and viewed by many as an apparatchik of the ruling African National Congress.

-----  
Whitewash  
-----

14. (SBU) After several months of investigation, the appointed commission submitted its report to the SABC Board in late September. On October 12, the Board released a nine-page summary of the commission's 78-page report. Much of the report's detailed criticism of Zikalala's management style and of his decisions regarding the use of commentators (Ref B) was not included. The summary did include the commission's relatively few positive

findings about Zikalala -- such as an acknowledgment he wanted to improve the quality of reporting and the failure to uncover a consistent political motivation for his actions -- and ended with an expression of "full confidence" in him and his staff. In explaining why it refused to release the entire report, the Board among other things noted that witness allegations had not been tested in court. [COMMENT: an odd consideration for a media organization that routinely airs material that fails that standard.]

15. (U) The following day, the weekly Mail & Guardian newspaper published a series of articles quoting from the full version of the report and posted a leaked copy of it on its Website (www.mg.co.za). In several cases, the commission harshly criticized Zikalala's exclusion of commentators from SABC, saying they were not "objectively defensible." Their report also argued that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that the SABC newsroom under Zikalala was poisoned by fear and self censorship.

16. (SBU) In response, the SABC Board circled its wagons. It publicly expressed its full confidence in Zikalala in its report summary. It went to court in an unsuccessful effort to suppress the publication of the commission's full report on the Mail & Guardian website, even though the report itself clearly recommends the full text should be made public. A high-profile Board member, Thami Mazwai, wrote a scathing opinion piece in the influential Business Day newspaper that accused Zikalala's critics of a witch hunt.

-----  
Public Reaction: Outrage from the Usual Quarters  
-----

17. (SBU) Not surprisingly, those moves outraged freedom of expression advocates, editorialists, and opposition politicians. Political cartoonists had a field day, with one giving Zikalala the

PRETORIA 00004513 002 OF 002

none-too-flattering titles of "Comrade Commissar, Censor-in-Chief (and) His Stalinism." In Contrast, most government and ANC leaders have been conspicuously quiet so far. While public opinion is difficult to gauge without polling data, there have been no overt signs that the controversy is resonating deeply among South Africans.

18. (SBU) Still, SABC Chief Executive Officer Dali Mpofu attacked his critics in a full-page vitriolic commentary that appeared in the October 22 City Press newspaper. Instead of acknowledging the freedom of expression concerns raised, he dismissed his critics as right-wingers and their fellow travelers - commonly-used terms referring to the white minority and their black supporters - and said the Mail & Guardian coverage reflected "the pervasive anti-establishment hatred of anything connected to the democratically elected black-dominated government." Mpofu said not only was he reviewing allegations of wrongdoing by Zikalala, who is black, but is also investigating John Perlman, a white SABC radio presenter who contradicted on air an SABC spokesman who insisted there was no blanket ban on commentators. [NOTE: The commission report had exonerated Perlman, saying "we cannot fault him" for confronting an untruth.]

19. (U) The saga has left at least one intellectual arguing for a political revolution to usher out failed national leadership. Xolela Mangcu, visiting scholar at the Public Intellectual Life Project at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, argued in an October 19 Business Day column that both Zikalala and Mpofu were appointed to be political mouthpieces and not captains of an independent media, as required by the SABC charter. Mpofu's apparent inaction against Zikalala, he said, is "simply a symptomatic manifestation of a broader political, cultural and institutional malaise in this country. It is a malaise born of a cynical political culture in which political leaders brook no dissent, feed on public resources and then tell the sick and the poor to eat cake. Such political cultures never change until and unless there is a political revolution that ushers in a new leadership cadre."

-----  
Comment

-----  
¶10. (SBU) While the commissioners made clear that much of the testimony they heard focused on Zikalala and a narrow range of radio and television programs, their report left little doubt the SABC is not properly performing its role as an independent broadcaster airing a wide spectrum of opinion. The SABC Board's initial response to the commission's findings is not encouraging for those who believe meaningful reform of the newsroom is urgently needed. Mpofu's subsequent public diatribe suggests an appalling misunderstanding of legitimate freedom of expression concerns. Those responses are troubling for post-apartheid South Africa, in which an independent SABC was envisioned to be a pillar of democratic development in a color-blind nation.

BOST